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# An Institutional Perspective into Professional Development of English Teachers: A Case of Schools of Foreign Languages

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## Abstract

Throughout their teaching careers, teachers circulate in various learner groups and this means a need for new strategies or new approaches in order to satisfy the students and the institutions they are in. At this point; the need for this inevitable adaptation process arises. This adjustment is done by means of various professional development programs which become a necessity not for the fact that the training programs have insufficiencies but teaching situations and institutions are in a state of continuous change. In this study, point of views and attitudes of administrators of School of Foreign Languages to professional development activities will be discussed. When doing this, some open ended questions have been addressed to directors and vice-directors to find out their expectations and level of eagerness to join, organize or fund those activities. It is hoped that this specific study will serve as a tool and inspiration for future research in this field.

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## 1. Introduction

It is commonly accepted that education is a really complex continuum which includes the relationship among the learning process itself, the intentions, and the actions of teachers, their different background and culture, the individual features of the learners and the learning atmosphere. In this respect, a successful educator is someone who

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has an understanding of the complexities of the teaching and learning process (Williams & Burden, 1997). Throughout the last three decades mankind has been witnessing not only a huge technological development but also a tremendous sociological shift which has brought a generation of all-hearing, all-aware and all-consuming. In order to meet the changing needs of society, educational institutions and teachers as a part of these organizations are in a state of constant change. Whitford & Wood (2010) stated that schools have to cope with changes in “economy and students demographics.

Based on the assumption that teachers are the main agents who confront first with the changing profiles of learners or students, professional development activities for teachers have been conducted for years. According to Nabhani and Bahous (2010), the backbone of any successful and effective educational organization is a high quality teaching staff. It follows that a well-designed professional development (PD) program is indispensable for preparing teachers for changing expectations and programs. Moreover, according to Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 4) one of the six items of teacher development requirements is to understand how our roles change according to the kind of learners we are teaching. The deep meaning of this is; development process has an institutional dimension because kinds of students change with regard to the institutions in which the teachers work.

However, when the related literature on the effect of professional development on the quality of an institution has been analyzed it is seen that this topic has not been debated much from the points of views of school or institution directors. This phenomenon was the main motive for the researchers to launch a study to see the administrators’ position in the professional development activities.

## **2. Methodology**

The ultimate aim of this study is to shed light into expectations and level of eagerness of the administrators of Schools of Foreign Languages to join, organize or fund professional development activities. The underlying motive behind this given study was that there are 173 state or private universities in Turkey and most of them have Schools of Foreign Languages. The main aim of these institutions is to give one-year preparatory class to teach English to newly registered university students. The expectations of university administrations are remarkably high from prep. programs; thus the directors of these programs try really hard to meet the demands of the higher administration by assigning and setting up testing offices, material preparation offices, curriculum development units. Besides these internal units, they resort to some outer help, which are professional development activities in this contest, in order to prepare their staff members to meet the institutional aims. Taking these general ideas in consideration the researchers formed a nine-question open ended questionnaire to obtain the views of the administrators of School of Foreign Languages on these activities.

### *2.1. Participants*

The participants of this study were the directors or vice-directors of Schools of Foreign Languages who are actively working in various universities throughout Turkey.

### *2.2. Research design*

In order to reach some enlightening points in this given study, the researchers chose to give a nine-question open ended questionnaire which has some follow up questions for some of the addressed questions so as to clarify the ideas more.

### *2.3. Data Collection and Analysis*

Within the process of the study, qualitative analysis techniques were preferred so as to give a clear description of the data gathered about the situation. To be more precise, researchers chose summative content analysis which involves counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context. In order to be reader friendly, the analysis of the open-ended questions was done in the same order with the original questionnaire.

### 3. Findings and discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate and try to find out some insights about the perceptions of the administrators of the School of Foreign Languages on professional development. As result of the given open-ended questionnaire the following points seem to emerge.

- Nearly all institutions throughout Turkey find Professional Development Activities (PDA) necessary in both from the institutional and personal perspective. Most of the schools have in-service training programs for their own staff, especially; newly recruited staff.

“As an institution we believe in teacher development and for this reason we have got a “professional development” unit in our school. This unit is responsible for preparing pre-service programs and mentoring newly recruited staff. During the academic year PDU members also organize seminars and decide on speakers to be invited and the topics to be dealt with. It is also their duty to conduct observations and hold pre and post-observation meetings.” Gazi University

- Almost all the institutions have organized a PDA at least once. To instill the institutional philosophy, mission statement or the main structure of the institution these kinds of activities are found truly fruitful by the institutional directors.  
“PD is a continuing process and carried out throughout an academic year. Instructors gain an understanding of institution’s philosophy, vision, and expectations of the institution through PD activities.” Izmir Economy University
- In order to understand whether the PDAs reach their aims or not have always been a very crucial concern for both organizers and leaders of institutions. In this study it was observed that a great many of the institutions give feedback sheets or questionnaires to obtain opinion of their staff.
- Almost all the schools of foreign languages all around Turkey have units of testing, curriculum development or professional development and so on. These units make the decision on which programs to take participate in coordination with their colleagues. However, if there are programs which seem to be efficient for the future of institutions, directors intervene the process and take their own initiative for assigning someone to join those activities.
- Nearly all the institutions send their staff to PDAs on condition that their timetables and budgets are not harmed. Besides, they are genuinely willing to compensate their expenses. Nevertheless, they have to consider the allocations given by the government. Recently, some institutions try to meet these expenses via the funds given by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey and YÖK (Higher Education Council of Turkey)
- If a staff is sent with a formal assignment, most of the institutions in Turkey want a feedback report or a presentation after coming back from the PDA program.  
“When a staff member attends an academic activity, they fill out the feedback form and return it to the Teacher Training coordinator. If the person thinks that s/he should share the information with the staff, s/he can organize a presentation to the staff.” Pamukkale University
- Although there is not a consensus on the criteria, almost all the institutions have common specifications for their personnel to which PDA activity to participate. Main concerns on sending a staff member to a professional developmental activity are;
  - *choosing the right personnel according to the units they are assigned.*
  - *organizing make up classes or substitute teacher.*
  - *did he/she attend any other conferences within a year?*
  - *matching the right topics with right units.*
- Being in a managerial position in Turkish university context means much more work load than usual. In the light of this truth, it has been observed that most of the school directors do not find enough time to initiate their own drive for professional development. But it seems that annual meeting of School of Foreign Languages Directors have been very beneficial for keeping them up-to-date to new laws and trends in language policies of Higher Educational Council. Moreover, a lot of directors try to organize mini-discussion groups before making crucial decisions about the institution.

“I’d like to improve my crisis management skills and I already follow the developments in teaching. I am working on using the latest technology in my teaching and bring that technology to the school to enable all instructors to use them.”  
Selcuk University.

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the findings emerged in this given study, PDAs are considered as an indispensable part of an institution to reach its ultimate aim of reaching perfection. AS Jackson and Street (2005b) claimed that school leaders have to create conditions in order to allow teachers to work collaboratively, it is overt that this will reduce the tension among the colleagues and will eventually heighten the collegiality. As a result of increased collegiality, the teachers will feel free to openly say their weak points and on which areas of study they need development. Another supportive statement comes from Bolam and his colleagues (2005) which maintain that supportive leadership and school management is necessary for ‘effective professional learning communities’ (EPLC). Eight key characteristics of an EPLC given by Bolam et al are: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils’ learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and collective professional learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support. They conclude that professional learning communities can promote school and system-wide capacity building for sustainable school improvement. To sum up it can be said that school leaders should maintain a healthy balance and a mutual interaction between the leadership values and the requirements of having both talented and up-to-date team of English teachers.

#### Appendix A. OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

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Dear Professor;

These open ended questions were designed to investigate and try to find out some insights about the perceptions of the administrators of the School of Foreign Languages on professional development. Your cooperation will be highly appreciated. Your responses will only be used for this research and will be confidential. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

##### AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE INTO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH TEACHERS: A CASE OF SCHOOLS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

1. Do you find professional development activities necessary for your staff to meet the goals of your institution’s mission statement? Does your institution have any kind of Professional Development activity? If so; could you please describe them?
2. If you have organized a Professional development activity program why did you need this kind of activity? Did it reach the aim(s) you had determined?
3. Did you organize a follow-up program to your Professional Development activity? Did your teachers feel the change? Did you have a feedback report from your teachers?
4. Do you make the decisions yourself on which program for your instructors to take part in?
5. Do you eagerly send your instructors to these kinds of organizations?
6. Do you allocate funds for your staff to compensate their expenses in their journey to those programs? (If so, how much do you allocate?)
7. Do you expect a feedback report or a presentation after the return of the staff you have sent?

8. Do you select the personnel to be sent on your own or are there any criteria for choosing? Do you insist on sending the staff you had chosen if there is a resistance on the part of instructors?
  9. What initiatives do you take for your own development as a school leader?
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